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Mapping gender. Old images ; new figures

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Sidelining Women in Contemporary Science-Fiction Film

Marianne Kac-Vergne

1 The success of the *Alien* franchise and of the first two *Terminator* films, and the resulting cult status of their remarkably tough female protagonists, Ellen Ripley and Sarah Connor, often obscures the fact that women rarely play more than a bit part in science fiction films centered almost exclusively on male heroes. Ripley and Connor have attracted so much critical analysis[1] that little attention has been paid to the status and role of women in the genre as a whole[2], thus skewing the debate in favor of "action heroines." In 1993, Yvonne Tasker announced the arrival of muscular action heroines taking on the physical and narrative attributes of masculinity, as "a response of some kind to feminism," (Tasker 15) a forecast confirmed in 2007 by Silke Andris and Ursula Frederick in *Women Willing to Fight* (2): "The 1980s and 1990s heralded the arrival of powerful muscular heroines the likes of Ellen Ripley (*Alien* quartet [1979, 1986, 1992, 1997]), Sarah Connor (*The Terminator* trilogy [1984, 1991, 2003]) and G.I. Jane (*G.I. Jane* [1997])." Yet, interestingly, what Andris and Frederick overlook is that Sarah Connor has died and does *not* appear in the third installment of the *Terminator* films (*Terminator 3*, J. Mostow, 2003), which focuses primarily on a young John Connor aided by an old Terminator and a bewildered ex-girlfriend pitted against a devious female Terminatrix: the woman with the gun has become the antagonist.

2 In fact, examining masculinity in science fiction as a genre and thus focusing on a large corpus leads to the striking realization that there are very few centrally-positioned action heroines and even fewer "female heroes," to use Christine Cornea's more revealing expression (160)[3]. Women appear mostly as supporting characters, enhancing the male hero's central status in the narrative. Rather than focusing solely on what is finally an exception, this paper aims at deconstructing the mainstream narrative, where female characters help and support the *male* heroes while remaining subordinate sidekicks, leading me to wonder about the role that these women play: why cast a woman as supporting character?

3 Indeed, whereas women traditionally appeared as sites of desire (and were often publicized as such) from Méliès's silent shorts up to the 1970s, including *Metropolis* (F. Lang, 1927), *Forbidden Planet* (F. Wilcox, 1956), *Planet of the Apes* (F. Schaffner, 1968), *THX1138* (G. Lucas, 1971), or *Soylent Green* (R. Fleischer, 1973), from the 1980s, women were no longer positioned as sexual objects or even as romantic partners, but as decision-making characters with a will of their own. Their inclusion as active women with agency in the 1980s can be attributed to the impact of 1960s-1970s Second Wave feminism, its criticism of media representations of women and demands for recognition and equality in the public sphere; yet, with the exception of a brief moment of glory in the 1990s, women have remained marginalized in contemporary science fiction. This paper therefore contends that active female characters have been introduced in the science fiction genre as an act of feminist tokenism, giving the illusion that women have gained power in a postfeminist America. However, they are almost systematically marginalized, so that their main function is in fact to act as mirrors that reflect the male hero, delineating the contours of masculinity within a male genre concerned with male anxieties.

4 Concentrating on mainstream science fiction blockbusters of the past three decades, I will first examine the emergence of active sidekicks, starting in the mid-1980s, by focusing on Lewis (Nancy Allen) in the *RoboCop* franchise (*RoboCop*, P. Verhoeven, 1987; *RoboCop 2*, I. Kershner, 1990; *RoboCop 3*, F. Dekker, 1993), and Veronica (Ally Walker) in *Universal Soldier* (R. Emmerich, 1992). Then, I will survey the rise of action heroines, comparing the oft-criticized masculinization of Sarah Connor in *Terminator 2* to the more postfeminist Lt. Melanie Ballard (Natasha Henstridge) in *Ghosts of Mars* (J. Carpenter, 2001), honing in on the postfeminist shift operated by the 1990s. Finally, the disappointing legacy of 1990s action heroines will highlight how recent science fiction blockbusters sideline female characters, giving them only apparent power in supposedly postfeminist worlds.

Women as sidekicks: kicking… from the side

5 The 1980s witnessed a shift in the roles given to women: no longer cast as remote princesses or love objects who die, leaving the hero lonesome but heroic, as they were in the 1970s (for instance in *The Omega Man* (B. Sagal, 1971), *THX 1138* (G. Lucas, 1971), or the remake of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (P. Kaufman, 1978)), female characters now participate in the action and live to see the end of the film. They are presented as competent and cool-headed professionals, as active characters – often more so than the male protagonists. In *RoboCop* for instance, Ann Lewis is first shown in mid-combat, high-kicking and punching a criminal to the ground, watched admiringly by Murphy, the male protagonist. The scene insists on her physical strength and downplays her gender, since she is in uniform and wears a helmet. Only when she removes her helmet does it become clear that she is a woman, signified by her proud and slightly sensual head movement. Despite Murphy's initial gaze and praising comment, Lewis is desexualised throughout the film. Always in uniform, with short hair and an androgynous physique, she is portrayed first and foremost as a police officer, who is systematically called by her last name: she is a buddy, not a love interest. The police is indeed presented as an egalitarian gender-neutral environment, where all officers, men and women alike, face the same difficulties and risks. Like brothers and sisters, they

even change in the same locker room, the camera panning from one bare-chested officer to the next without any difference being made between men's torsos and women's breasts, all covered in the end by the same uniform. Sexual difference tends to be erased throughout the *RoboCop* franchise, so that Lewis knows that something is wrong when Robocop calls her Ann and comments on her hair in *RoboCop 2*.

6 However, Lewis becomes more and more feminine in the two sequels: her hair is longer, blonder and always neatly bobbed in the second film, while in *RoboCop 3*, she hardly ever wears her helmet so that the emphasis is back on the long, strawberry blond curls which were the hallmark of Nancy Allen's early career as a glamorous and sensual beauty in films by Brian De Palma (*Carrie*, 1973, *Dressed to Kill*, 1980, *Blow Out*, 1981). Lewis's feminization goes hand in hand with her loss of agency in the two sequels: in *RoboCop 2*, she arrives on the first crime scene after Robocop, as his back-up, and is ordered around, tellingly told to drop her gun so that Robocop can shoot the criminal while she catches the baby that was being held hostage. After being overpowered by a young boy who calls her a "bitch," she does not participate in the pursuit of the film's criminal mastermind, Caine, and is mostly absent from the second half of the film. She is further downgraded in the third film, since, after being insulted by a sexist motorist, she has to be rescued by Robocop, then gets shot without a fight and dies in his arms, a sacrificial victim laid at the foot of an altar, thus disappearing from the remaining two-thirds of the film.

7 Like Nancy Allen, Ally Walker, who achieved fame in the late 1980s for her role in the TV show *Santa Barbara*, was also cast against type in *Universal Soldier* as Jean-Claude Van Damme's intrepid buddy. Veronica is actually the first character in the film to be shot in close-up at the beginning of the opening sequence, after the pre-credit sequence in Vietnam, and stands out as a female civilian in a decidedly military opening full of male soldiers in fatigues. She is presented from the outset as bold and confident as she honks aggressively to get through a police checkpoint, arriving twenty seconds before she is to go live on camera. The film humorously emphasizes her unglamorous, even masculine, attire, which evokes classic (male) reporters in the Tintin tradition, but is unsuitable for a female TV reporter, thus exposing the codes of femininity imposed by mainstream television: she has to take off her felt hat, put a jacket over her khaki shirt, drop her cigarette and be shot waist-high so her dusty sneakers do not show on camera. Despite her lateness and inappropriate clothes, Veronica is nevertheless a professional: at the drop of a hat, she gives a smooth, clear and confident report that goes off without a hitch.

8 Driven solely by professional curiosity, Veronica is a daredevil maverick willing to break the rules to get a good story, thus triggering the narrative as she breaks into the military compound and discovers the universal soldiers. She constantly takes the lead over men who are less daring or less intelligent than her, first dragging her unwilling cameraman into the restricted military zone, ignoring his repeated attempts at holding her back. His constant moaning, panic-driven crash when they try to escape, and inability to speak up when humiliatingly brought to his knees (whereas Veronica speaks decisively and holds her own in front of two fearsome universal soldiers) inevitably leads to an early death: he is the weaker of the two and therefore quickly killed off. Veronica also takes things in hand with GR44/Luc Devreux (Jean-Claude Van Damme), replacing the colonel in charge and taking over his authority when she throws out the headphones through which Luc receives orders – a transfer of power

from man to woman which the colonel resentfully acknowledges by calling her a "bitch." Veronica represents a threat to the authorities, since she is constantly breaking the rules, including the norms of feminine behavior – and is accordingly turned into a wanted criminal for her actions. Her energy and feisty spirit are opposed to Luc's docile behavior, as he follows her like a child. She is the one making decisions (she decides to go see the doctor who operated on him) and handling the money, so that Luc is at a loss without her, as in the diner where he goes blank when asked to pay for the enormous quantity of food he just ate. Thus, she becomes the figure of authority to which he defers, as exemplified by the question he asks her in a small voice in the diner, "Do you think you can help me?". The invincible universal soldier relies on a female partner for guidance and financial support.

9 However, despite their feisty personalities and active participation in the narrative, Lewis and Veronica are sidelined during the course of the action, literally evicted from the driver's seat: Veronica is never shown driving after her first appearance, while in *RoboCop*, Murphy strides past Lewis to take the wheel immediately after partnering up, even though he is new to the area. In *Universal Soldier*, Luc constantly saves Veronica from being shot, protecting her with his body and clearing an escape path for them. She never holds a gun and, like Lewis, is tied down during the last battle, so that she is completely marginalized while Luc fights his foe (Dolph Lundgren) on his own. The scene insists on her powerlessness as Luc is being badly beaten up: she is gagged and tied down by ropes, then unable to do anything but scream "Luc" in despair after liberating herself, before being expelled from the frame by a grenade, so that the spectacular final ten-minute martial arts fight happens entirely without her.

10 So, if they are sidelined from the action and there is no romance, what role do these women play? It is interesting to note that Veronica is a journalist, dedicated to observing and recording. As such, she bears witness to the possibilities of the male body: intrigued by the stunning performance of the universal soldiers at the beginning of the film, Veronica endeavours to find out more, opens a casket containing the body of an apparently dead soldier and starts taking pictures, before stepping back, wide-eyed at the sight of the soldier suddenly opening his eyes. The anomalously indestructible properties of the universal soldiers are revealed through reaction shots of her face, as when she gapes at Luc's instantly healed gunshot wound, so that she is positioned primarily as an observer prompting the appropriate reactions in the audience. More surprisingly, the same goes for Lewis, who, despite her status as a policewoman, is quickly cut off from the action to become a mere observer. Distracted by the sight of a criminal's penis at the very beginning of her first onscreen investigation, she is knocked out (subdued by penis envy?), and thus cannot respond to Murphy's calls for help in his confrontation with the gang, resurfacing only to see him being brutally executed by them. She first hears Murphy's howl, then witnesses his execution behind bars which prevent her from helping him. The brutality of the execution and Murphy's suffering are intensified by the reverse shots of her face and horrified expression, eyes wide open, hands gripped to the bars which work as an additional screen keeping her at a distance from the action.

11 From then on, Lewis becomes the witness of the protagonist's physical and emotional pain, the only one to recognize the human Murphy under the metallic armor of Robocop. She is the medium through which the male protagonist's suffering can be visualized and laden with compassion, a supporting character in every sense of the

word, providing assistance to Murphy, but also – and perhaps mainly – offering empathy and compassion. When he is attacked by his fellow officers, she picks him up in her car and helps him recover in an abandoned factory, where she bears witness to Murphy/Robocop's physical trauma as he unscrews his helmet to reveal a fractured head. Her vision of a pathetic hybrid abandoned by all, family and colleagues, is reflected in the mirror she holds up for him, while the numerous reverse shots of a sorrowful Lewis highlight Robocop's physical and emotional trauma by systematically including his fractured head. Reworking Laura Mulvey's famous concept of the man as "bearer of the look" in classical Hollywood films, *RoboCop* casts a woman as bearer of the look, a role which is confirmed when Lewis helps Robocop fix his targeting system by aiming for him, literally substituting her human eyes to his digital vision. The desiring male gaze is replaced by a compassionate female gaze which places women as observers rather than active participants.

12 As Yvonne Tasker argues, women are "rendered increasingly marginal" since the male figure is both active and passive: "he controls the action at the same time as he is offered up to the audience as sexual spectacle" (16). Men have become objects of the gaze but the gaze is now mediated by women. These women could be seen as a means of facilitating (heterosexual) audience identification by removing, somewhat unsuccessfully, any hint of homoeroticism, what Tasker calls "the fixing of difference and heterosexual desire" (16). This is especially apparent in *Universal Soldier*, where the final hand-to-hand combat sequence in the rain and mud between Luc and Scott is justified in the narrative by the need to protect Veronica (with reverse shots of her struggling and screaming), then avenge her supposed death once a grenade has conveniently tossed her offscreen. However, these women facilitate identification mainly because they mark the heroes as human despite the films' insistence on the latter's inhumanity or hybridity: Veronica is for instance repeatedly embarrassed by Luc's nakedness even though he is not really a man. Their expressive faces reflect the human weakness and vulnerability of otherwise supra-human heroes, so that their role is embodied by the reaction shot: providing emotion while watching the action.

13 In so doing, the presence of women points to a major weakness in the male heroes: their sexual impotence. Women are indeed cast as buddies because of the impossibility of sex. In the scene described above, Lewis is a witness to Robocop's suffering but also to his pathetic "loss of manhood," as symbolized by his inability to shoot straight and sorrowful question about his former self's wife and son ("Murphy had a wife and son. What happened to them?"). The faithful partner can thus be assimilated to a mother rather than a lover, taking care of him and bringing him baby food. The impossibility of sex is dealt with very candidly in *Universal Soldier*, where possibly erotic scenes are completely defused to become humorous. The humor indeed lies in the absence, even impossibility of sexual desire between Luc and Veronica, who systematically recoils when confronted with his naked body, first in front of the motel, then in the toilets of a service station: in the second instance, she accepts only reluctantly to feel his body in search of a tracker, looking awkward throughout. Both scenes humorously play on the contrast between Veronica's disgusted expression and Van Damme's beautifully sculpted body on display, most emphatically in the shot of her repulsed face appearing between his muscular legs in the second scene. The point is obviously to underline Van Damme's muscular physique, shot naked in the foreground while she stands in the background fully clothed (she is even hidden behind him in the second scene), but within the narrative, his nakedness stands for vulnerability. Both times, Luc strips off

his clothes as a cry for help, first because he needs ice to cool down, then because he needs her to remove his tracker. The impossibility of sexual desire is played for laughs, but there is something pathetic in this man-child who does not know if his penis is "supposed to be there." Like Lewis in *RoboCop*, Veronica, who answers reassuringly, "Yes it is. It's very normal," is therefore positioned as his mother, not his lover. The very idea of a lover for Luc (called GR44 by the military) appears incongruous, as expressed in Veronica's question, "Is there a Mrs 44 waiting for you someplace?". As in *RoboCop*, it is the presence of a woman which triggers the realization of sexual impotence and emotional loneliness, highlighting the male heroes' pathetic dimension in scenes when the narrative suddenly comes to a halt, the dialogue replaced with plaintive music, the male heroes alone in long shots while reverse shots of concerned female faces arouse pity and compassion.

The fleeting rise of action heroines

14 The major exception to the marginalization of female characters in 1980s science fiction is of course the character of Ellen Ripley in the *Alien* saga, whose success in *Alien* (Scott, 1979), and even more so in the second opus, *Aliens* (Cameron, 1986), triggered the rise of the action heroine insofar as "it signalled to the industry that female-centred, big-budget, action-adventure films were a viable option" (Krämer 112). Ripley's elevation to the status of main protagonist can be read as a Hollywood strategy to attract female spectators to the traditionally male science-fiction genre, but it is also linked to societal changes, as briefly underlined by Ximena Gallardo and C. Jason Smith in their introduction to *Alien Woman* (3): "Ripley is the product of 1960s and '70s Second Wave feminism. [...] Without feminism, there would be no Ripley." Ripley's success at the box office indeed has to be considered in a context of increased visibility and presence of women in the public sphere. Census numbers reveal striking changes concerning women in the 1980s, first in the labor force: paid males in federal civilian employment outnumbered females by almost two to one in 1980, while in 1992 the ratio had dropped to 1.3 to one; the percentage of women in the labor force grew from 43.3% in 1970 to 57.9% in 1993 (*Statistical Abstract*), as well as in politics: the number of women elected to Congress almost doubled from 1978 to 1992, from 17 to 33 (Manning and Brudnick 78). Furthermore, in 1990-91, the Gulf War saw the largest deployment of military women to a combat theatre, so that women on duty wearing military uniforms appeared regularly on the evening news, watched by millions of Americans (Women in Military Service for America Memorial Foundation). Hollywood finally caught on to the mainstreaming of women in the public sphere, including in a military setting, in the 1990s, which saw the rise and fall of the action heroine, defined by Raphaëlle Moine as a female character who overcomes the trials facing her through her physical abilities and combat techniques (6).

15 Ripley's success in *Aliens* combined with the social changes mentioned above thus help explain the transformation of Sarah Connor from harassed waitress in pink in *The Terminator* (Cameron, 1985) to combat-ready warrior in *Terminator 2: Judgment Day*, also directed by James Cameron and released in 1991. Her first appearance in the latter film borrows directly from the hallmarks of hypermasculinity displayed by the action hero: she is presented working out in her cell, sweating in an undershirt which reveals bulging muscles. The body's fragmentation (the camera does not show Sarah's face but

only her left shoulder) and the close-up of her biceps evoke the extreme close-ups of body parts which often introduce hypermasculine action heroes, like the close-up of Rambo's bulging biceps which opens *Rambo: First Blood, Part II* (Cosmatos, 1985) or the close-up of the Terminator's chest after his naked landing in *The Terminator*. Unlike Ripley, whose body is revealed as gracefully feminine at the end of *Aliens*, Sarah is completely masculinized, as underlined by her description in *New York* magazine: "the power body – the arms and shoulders packed with muscle, the straight thick waist, the boy's hips, no ass, the bosom so small it doesn't require a bra... the arms have rivers of veins rising above the bulging muscle." (Baumgold 26) The two references to muscle and the absence of waist, hips, ass or bosom paint her almost as a biological male. Sarah is entirely assimilated into warrior masculinity, as emphasized by her costume and demeanor, so that she is ready to kill an innocent computer scientist and his family in her warrior rage. She even orders his wife to get down on her knees and calls her a 'bitch,' using the most common degrading insult against women which positions the one saying it as dominant, thus masculine. Sarah Connor can therefore be seen as a masculine woman, or as a man passing as a woman who projects a masculine ideology of domination through violence. As action heroines, Ripley and Connor were indeed sharply criticized by feminist critics, who saw them as merely reproducing male attitudes in a woman's body, without any subversive effect: for Jeanine Basinger for instance, "Putting women in traditional male action roles, without changing their psychology, is just cinematic cross-dressing." (quoted in Johnson 153)

16 However, *Terminator 2* actually attends to female concerns insofar as it adopts Sarah Connor's point of view and dwells on specifically female themes. Indeed, *Terminator 2* opens with Sarah's premonitory vision of the future after Judgment Day, described by her in a voice-over which is validated as truthful by the preceding intertitles giving the date and location of the action. Sarah Connor is thus presented as the omniscient narrator of the action, and her vision acquires 'objective' legitimacy: the lengthy pre-credit sequence set in 'Los Angeles 2029 AD' appears not as a product of her imagination filmed in subjective camera but as the likely future of humanity within the film's narrative economy. The duration of the scene, over two minutes long, and the erasure of the source of the image in fact posit Sarah's point of view as that of the camera's, so that the nightmarish future she foretells like a Cassandra whom nobody believes is presented as "real" to the viewers and will be borne out by the rest of the film (as well as the franchise). Sarah is thus introduced as the all-knowing truth-teller with whom the audience should side against the ignorant men of the medical establishment whose power and decision to keep her locked up are unfounded, especially since they prevent her from seeing her son.

17 Indeed, as in the *Alien* saga, the theme of motherhood pervades *Terminator 2*: Sarah Connor is first and foremost a mother intent on protecting her son in every way possible, as emphasized in David Ansen's review for *Newsweek*: "Hamilton's sinewy Sarah, a fanatical matriarchal warrior, is a wonderfully gaga heroine, as ferocious as a lioness protecting her cub, and twice as butch as Sigourney Weaver in *Aliens*." However, this comment compares her maternal instinct to that of an animal's, and insists on her aggressiveness and physical strength, i.e. her masculine traits, making of Connor a warrior more than a mother, so that in the end she is discredited as "fanatical" and "gaga". Indeed, Connor appears devoid of traditional feminine characteristics, so that the film tends to present her as a bad mother, concerned only with her son's physical well-being rather than his emotional happiness. Her lack of tenderness and emotional

intelligence is apparent in the scene which follows her escape from the psychiatric hospital with her son John and the Terminator: when she asks him how he is and opens her arms, John rushes to her in search of affection but is disappointed when she starts palpating him frenetically to make sure he has not been wounded. John's disappointment with and rejection of his mother highlight Sarah's inability to behave as a "normal" feminine mother would, expressing feelings and emotions. Sarah is thus depicted as lacking in femininity, as underlined by the end of the scene, which contrasts Sarah's cold and stern expression with John's tears, as well as with the Terminator's concerned reaction to those same tears: several reaction shots of his perplexed expression in the rearview mirror insist on his concern for John, as opposed to Sarah who turns away from her son[4].

18 Moreover, at the beginning of the scene mentioned above, Sarah yells at John for risking his life to rescue her, asserting that "[she] can take care of [her]self," so that her fierce independence is linked in the film to her lack of emotions, and hence seen in an increasingly negative light. Indeed, her unilateral decision to kill Dyson, the computer scientist who will develop Skynet, is presented as terribly mistaken, thus calling into question her judgment and rationality, especially since she herself breaks down and is unable to carry out her plan. Consequently, her status as a heroine is seriously compromised, which also challenges her female point of view, as emphasized by the contrast between her cold and cynical voice-over about Dyson ("It's not every day that you find out you're responsible for three billion deaths. He took it pretty well.") and the image, focused on Dyson's distressed expression as he mumbles, "I feel like I'm gonna throw up." Set apart from the others by the *mise en scène* (she is sitting on a kitchen counter, out of focus, while Dyson, his wife, the Terminator and John are all sitting together at the same table) and her emotional detachment, smoking a cigarette in the background, Sarah is set at a distance by the film, so that her response to Dyson, a feminist diatribe against "fucking men like you [who] built the hydrogen bomb" is debunked as extreme and unwarranted, the black and wounded Dyson appearing more like a victim than an oppressor. Sarah Connor can thus be considered as a caricature of the "women's libber" or "bra burner", those Second Wave feminists who supposedly rejected femininity to become "butch" (like Connor who does not wear a bra), and constantly vituperated against men, making everyone ill-at-ease: during Sarah's speech, John covers his face and finally interrupts her, asking her to be more "constructive", i.e. less rigidly intolerant and counterproductive.

19 Sarah's portrayal as a brutal and unfeeling mother disconnected from femininity and unproductively hateful towards men thus echoes the criticism directed against Second Wave feminism by the mass media[5] and some postfeminist writers such as Naomi Wolf in *Fire with Fire* or Rene Denfeld in *The New Victorians*, who rejected the previous generation's feminism as an outdated sexually repressive "victim feminism" which denigrated female (hetero)sexual pleasure, feminine glamor and any other form of overtures to men. Indeed, the 1980s and especially the 1990s saw the emergence of a new buzzword in the media, "postfeminism", an ambiguous and hotly contested term since the prefix "post", as Stéphanie Gentz and Benjamin Brabon demonstrate, can be read both as celebrating feminist achievements, or emphasizing what Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra call "the pastness of feminism" (Gentz and Brabon 1-41, Tasker and Negra 2). This ambiguity is particularly apparent in *Ghosts of Mars*, which was released

in 2001 and features several women of action, including Natasha Henstridge as the main protagonist.

20 *Ghosts of Mars* begins with a series of intertitles specifying the location and date of the story (Mars 2176 A.D.), geographical and demographic information, and, interestingly, the type of society present on Mars, a matriarchal society. *Ghosts of Mars* is thus possibly the only science fiction film which envisions the future as matriarchal; furthermore, this matriarchy is presented not as exotic or odd, but as perfectly natural, seen by John Carpenter as a "logical" consequence of the lack of resources and the consequent need to control births on Mars. The opening scene thus presents a board meeting headed by a woman dressed in a gray suit, and attended by other women in gray as well as a few men. The meeting seems perfectly ordinary, even mundane: the costumes are drab while the setting, which features leather chairs in a concrete box of a meeting room, is particularly minimalistic. *Ghosts of Mars* thus seems to realize the goals of Second Wave feminism insofar as female power is in place and is a given: female authority is never questioned because it is female but because it is a form of authority, both by women – Lt. Melanie Ballard (Natasha Henstridge), asks for a lawyer before her hearing, and by men – Desolation Williams (Ice Cube) complains about being held down by "the Woman" instead of "the (white) Man".

21 All the figures of authority are women, played by well-known mature actresses as forms of intertextual homage: to blaxploitation in the case of Pam Grier, who plays the decisive Commander Helena Braddock, to westerns (e.g. *Shenandoah*) in the case of Rosemary Forsyth, the Inquisitor heading the board meeting, and to science fiction in the case of Joanna Cassidy (best-known for her role in *Blade Runner*), the scientist who let the ghosts of Mars loose and alone understands what is happening – the exception being Natasha Henstridge, who was actually cast at the last minute to replace the older, edgier and better-known Courtney Love. Moreover, as members of the Mars police force, Commander Helena Braddock and Lt. Melanie Ballard repeatedly demonstrate assertiveness in their decision-making and unquestionable leadership abilities: during the squad's investigation in Shining Canyon, the Commander systematically leads the way as well as the interrogation of the prisoners they meet, and, upon her death, is replaced without a hitch by her second-in-command, Melanie, who meets every challenge to her authority with vigor and cunning: when forced by his accomplices to open Williams's cell, she waits for them to enter and locks them all in, then negotiates with Williams for them to submit to her command and twists his huge brother's arm when he refuses to obey; later, she orders the train to stop and convinces her partners to turn back in order to eradicate the mob of ghoulish miners once and for all by setting off a nuclear bomb. In addition, Melanie is the one who displays most of the fighting skills throughout the film, whether it be shooting, martial arts, or hand-to-hand combat: she is the only character given a prolonged combat scene with an individual ghoul and is constantly sought out by the leader of the possessed miners, Big Daddy Mars. Furthermore, the power of narration also belongs to women: the film begins with a woman asking another to describe what happened, so that the story is told as a series of embedded flashbacks as Melanie recounts what she has seen and what others have told her. The entire story is, in effect, narrated by Melanie, with her voice and point-of-view therefore controlling the narration. Moreover, like *Terminator 2*, *Ghosts of Mars* establishes the female narrator as the privileged site of identification by giving the audience access to her mental images, first to her drug-induced reverie, then to her possession-induced visions. Melanie is indeed the only character to

experience and reject possession by the ghosts of Mars, an experience which makes her stronger and sharper by giving her insight into the evil spirit, marking her as a trustworthy narrator and necessary mediator between the audience and the supernatural forces which are the main focus of the film.

22 However, the most graphically brutal death of the film is the beheading of Commander Helena Braddock, who disappears early on to reappear as a severed head on a spike shot in extreme close-up, the only character to receive such gory attention in death. This sadistic treatment could be seen as a rejection of Second Wave feminism as embodied by Pam Grier and her earlier roles in 1970s blaxploitation films targeting (black) male violence (although Pam Grier's blaxploitation films were amply criticized as objectifying women). In addition, this death comes as punishment for Helena's inappropriate conduct at the beginning of the film, when she takes advantage of her higher rank to try and seduce Melanie, tainting both her lesbianism and contempt for men (she wishes she had been given a "good strong woman" as part of her team) with the smear of sexual harassment. In fact, what Carpenter presents in his interview as a form of "equality" (power corrupts all, women as well as men) reads in this scene as a way of attacking women in power and female solidarity against men, while it also diverts attention away from the more persistent sexual harassment of Melanie by Jericho (Jason Statham), which appears retrospectively as harmless flirting when Melanie eventually gives in to his advances. In contrast to the Commander's more uncompromising brand of feminism, Melanie is much more open to men, and her explicit refusal of the former's overtures as well as her active vindication of heterosexuality (she tells Helena, "I'm as straight as they come," which is confirmed when she acts on her sexual desire and kisses Jericho full on the mouth) position her more as a representative of postfeminism. Indeed, Melanie is much more glamorous than Helena or Sarah Connor, as she is played by a former model whose blond hair and large breasts are discreetly but nonetheless effectively enhanced by the lighting and costumes; she is also shown as "in touch" with her (hetero)sexual needs, and has no problems working with men: while her pairings with the rookie policewoman (Clea Duvall) lead to catastrophe (for instance when the rookie kills a possessed woman, thus liberating a ghost which infects Melanie), she is more comfortable with men, trusting Jericho's judgment on numerous occasions then teaming up with Desolation Williams right up to the last scene of the film. Drawing on glamorous and successful female figures of 1990s postfeminist popular culture, such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer,* Lt. Melanie Ballard could also be said to have paved the way for a horrific strand of science fiction centered on sexy action heroines, like the *Resident Evil* and *Underworld* franchises.

Back to the sidelines

23 When the bulk of mainstream science fiction production is considered, the action heroines of the 1990s and the cult figures of Ripley and Connor seem to have had a very limited legacy in the last fifteen years. This general sidelining of women could be seen as an instance of the remasculinization of America after 9/11 denounced by Susan Faludi in *The Terror Dream*, yet I would argue that it is more the pervasiveness of postfeminism in popular culture and the idea that women now have achieved equality that has in fact resulted in an erasure of feminism as well as the marginalization of

women's issues and presence as a whole. As Ann Braithwaite explains, "feminism is 'written in' precisely so it can be 'written out'" (25). Along those principles, recent science fiction blockbusters include women in power, but sideline them from the action, nodding to feminism while hollowing it out.

24 Many science fiction films thus introduce very early on women in positions of power, whether it be in high governmental positions or the high echelons of business. However, these women are either antagonists who must be bypassed or eliminated: *Terminator 3* thus cast a Terminatrix as fearsome opponent, while both *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (S. Derrickson, 2008) and *Elysium* (N. Blomkamp, 2013) feature hard-edged and war-mongering Secretaries of State reminiscent of the controversies surrounding the decisions and personalities of Madeleine Albright and Hillary Clinton; or brainy scientists whose overdeveloped intellectual abilities hamper them from participating in physical action, going back to "a common sf evolutionary division of labour" in 1950s science fiction, where men are "virile soldiers capable of using advanced weapons" while women are the "brain" giving out instructions (Sharp 221). Films like *I Robot* (A. Proyas, 2004) and the remakes of *The Day the Earth Stood Still* and of *Planet of the Apes* (T. Burton, 2001) indeed support the postfeminist illusion that women are now in power by presenting their female characters as members of the establishment and of a certain intellectual and economic elite from which the male protagonists are excluded. In *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, Dr Benson (Jennifer Connelly) is introduced in her professional environment, lecturing in astrobiology at Princeton: the first post-credits shot shows her in close-up as she addresses her class in front of a high-tech screen in a scientific jargon incomprehensible to the layman. Her position of knowledge and authority is further emphasized when she is selected by the government to take part in their crisis response team as a UFO approaches Earth at great speed. In the same way, Dr Calvin (Bridget Moynahan), the chief psychologist at USRobotics who is called on by the CEO himself to help Detective Spooner (Will Smith) in his investigation, has to reexplain in "English" what she does and how the robots work to the less knowledgeable detective. However, both women are the only prominent women in otherwise male-dominated work environments: the other characters in the crisis response team being airlifted to see the UFO in *The Day the Earth Stood Still* are all male, while in *I, Robot* the corridors of USR are mainly peopled by male staff and its CEO is, of course, a man.

25 Dr Benson and Dr Calvin are thus examples of what Holly Hassel has called "babe scientists", beautiful scientists whose "function is to reveal complex plot devices, usually scientific in origin" (190) but who are sidelined during the course of the action, unable to vanquish the threat because of "their over-reliance on science" and weakness compared to "the brute physical force, quick reflexes, powerful muscles and combat skills" of the male protagonists (196). The scene in *I, Robot* when Dr Calvin and Detective Spooner discover the unique robot Sonny sets up from early on this process of sidelining: while Dr Calvin seems at first to be the rational one, keeping her calm and asserting her authority when she orders Sonny to deactivate and picks up Spooner's service weapon, Spooner's apparent overreaction is justified when Sonny disobeys the command and grabs the gun off Calvin, pointing it at Spooner unheeding of Calvin's increasingly frantic orders. Dr Calvin is then literally pushed out of the action by Spooner who brings her to the floor while shooting at Sonny, and reappears more than thirty seconds later running after Spooner. In this scene, Dr Calvin is dissociated from the action by her inability to maintain her authority and hold a gun, two aspects which

will be the target of the film's humor later on, first when she shouts orders at an army of robots who all respond in the same way so that she is unable to pick out Sonny from the crowd, while Spooner does so in a matter of seconds thanks to his trustworthy gun, then when she awkwardly shoots, with her eyes closed, an aggressive robot standing right behind Spooner.

26 *The Day the Earth Stood Still* is even less generous to its supposed heroine, since it disqualifies her both as an action heroine and a scientist. Indeed, the remake adapted to contemporary expectations by "pumping up the action", giving the alien Klaatu (Keanu Reeves) supernatural powers – he can telepathically control machines and people, causing electrocutions, car and helicopter crashes, and finally a huge plague of metallic insects – which the original (*The Day the Earth Stood Still*, R. Wise, 1951) assigned solely to Gort, Klaatu's powerful robot which could also be activated by a woman. The power of technology is thus transferred directly into the hands of the male hero in the remake, as if his masculinity was the source of his power. Dr Benson's only active role seems to be to chauffeur Klaatu about town: for lack of better ideas, she finally drives him to see the wiser and better qualified Nobel-prize-winning Professor Barnhardt (after all, she is only a Doctor) who is, of course, a man (played by an "institution", John Cleese). The whole scene at Professor Barnhardt's house completely marginalizes Dr Benson: she can only watch while the two men finish each other's equations on the black board and discuss the future of humanity. In fact, in the second half of the film, following Barnhardt's advice ("Change his mind, not with reason but with yourself"), Benson abandons any attempt at scientific enquiry or reasoning to become what a woman truly is at heart: a mother, not a scientist. It is indeed after watching the tearful reunion between Benson and her son that Klaatu is moved to save humanity, but he quotes Barnhardt's argument (it is only on the brink of destruction that civilizations change): "Your professor was right. At the precipice, we change."

27 Finally, it is interesting to consider the downgrading of the female scientist from *Planet of the Apes* (F. Schaffner, 1968) in its 2001 remake, first because it furthers an essentialist vision of women as females, but also because it highlights the role female supporting characters play in consolidating the male protagonists' hegemonic masculinity. In the original, Zira (Kim Hunter) is a scientist who defends Taylor (Charlton Heston) out of scientific curiosity and conviction, standing up repeatedly to ape patriarchy, whereas in the remake, Ari (Helena Bonham Carter) has become a mere activist, a senator's daughter who behaves more like a spoiled child than a woman of conviction. For instance, the scene when she breaks in the human trader's den focuses on her grotesque and mannered antics as she jumps from one liana to another, speaking in histrionic tones: in the end, she achieves nothing since she only manages to release a few humans by buying them as slaves. Furthermore, the remake insists on Ari's immediate attraction to the hero, fleshing out the supposed sexual tension between Zira and Taylor expressed by the kiss at the end of the original, thus setting up a strange love triangle between Leo, the human male hero (Mark Wahlberg), Ari the female ape and Daena (Estella Warren), the beautiful blonde replacing Nova whose name is actually never uttered in the film. The two women are always shot in parallel, both constantly looking at the male hero "either significantly or winsomely" (Ebert), embodying in their rivalry the conflict between the humans and the apes. In this way, the two female characters are reduced to their biological difference, both as females and as representatives of their species: when Leo stops what Roger Ebert sees as "the squabbling among his fugitive group of *men* and apes" by yelling: "Shut up! That goes

for all species!", he is in fact addressing the two *women*, highlighting their belonging to a species and imposing male authority over bickering females.

28 Indeed, whereas the 1968 *Planet of the Apes* commented ironically on Taylor's domineering and arrogant masculinity, for instance through his nostalgic reminiscence of his past philandering while alone in a cage with the mute Nova, or in the scene where his conceited vision of himself ruling the planet ("If this is the best they've got here, in six months we'll be running this planet.") is immediately followed by a long shot of him hiding from the apes in a corn field with all the other supposedly inferior humans, the remake shamelessly asserts Leo's power and superiority over all, male and female, human and ape. Leo is for instance immediately singled out as his worthy adversary by Thade, the brutal leader of the apes, and is constantly shot in medium close-ups, leading a group who trail behind him in the background. Furthermore, Leo's hegemonic masculinity is vindicated through the point of view of the female Ari, who contrasts her suitor Thade's brutish alpha male behavior with Leo's "sensitive" nature: "I knew it, you're sensitive", she tells him when he acknowledges his fellow humans' violence toward apes and men. Thade's brutality towards Ari in the scene where he brands her with a hot iron is indeed immediately followed by a fade-in on Leo alone on a horse, making of Leo a meritorious leader and validating his less violent, more sensitive, but no less hegemonic masculinity. Not only is Leo presented as eminently desirable (in contrast with Zira's reluctance to receive Taylor's kiss in the original, Ari relishes Leo's, and Daena rushes to kiss him fully on the mouth), he is also cast as the savior of the human race, a Messiah who leads an army composed mainly of men, and defeats the superior apes. On the contrary, Ari and Daena are deprived of any agency: unlike Judith who succeeded in slaying Holophernes after seducing him, Ari's plan is discovered and she is crushed by Thade after bravely walking into his tent, while Daena refuses to talk to "her people" and become their spokesperson, convincing Leo instead of leading them to freedom.

29 As we have seen, the physical abilities of female characters tend to be disqualified in 21st century mainstream science fiction blockbusters: female supporting characters are included not to drive the action but to vindicate the male heroes' masculinity, not to say hypermasculinity. Female supporting characters are repositioned as "bearers of the look", as in the 1980s, but their gaze often expresses desire rather than, or in addition to, compassion. Films like *Planet of the Apes* and *I, Robot* include female points of view to enhance the desirability of the hypermasculine body, mediating its display so that hypermasculinity becomes acceptable and even desirable. Rather than highlighting the heroes' sexual impotence and the limits of hypermasculinity[6], these films combine hypermasculinity with sensitivity by including tender, or even sensual, scenes of physical contact, such as the scene in *I, Robot* when Dr Calvin examines Spooner's arm, shoulder and torso after realizing that he was implanted with robotic prostheses. The scene is particularly interesting since it is both sensual and medical. Dr Calvin is stunned at the sight of the half-naked Spooner, and clearly mediates, through a point-of-view shot, the gaze of the audience on Will Smith's beautifully sculpted muscular frame; she then palpates his body muscle by muscle, rib by rib, until she reaches his human body and he pulls away. Her admiration for the robotic work done to restore his body can of course be read as mediating desire for Will Smith's body, but also underlines his vulnerability, the frailty of his human body as well as his emotions. Indeed, this scene of physical contact is immediately followed by Spooner's revelation of the traumatic accident which transformed him into a cyborg and caused the death of

a little girl, an outpouring which underlines his emotional sensitivity through close-ups of his eyes full of tears and reaction shots of the sorrowful Dr Calvin. Dr Calvin's desiring female point of view thus vindicates Spooner's muscular, forceful and often violent hypermasculinity, while her compassion underlines his fundamental humanity. By bringing out the emotional side of hypermasculine heroes, female supporting characters therefore contribute to recasting hypermasculinity as an acceptable model of masculinity, while by underlining their human values and emotions, they naturalize the hegemony of male heroes who become humanity's natural leaders and its best representatives.

30 Despite the emergence of active female sidekicks in the 1980s and the rise of action heroines in the 1990s, feminist critics' hopes for strong female heroes have been dashed in the past decade, even more so in recent years, which have seen the role of women dwindle to almost nothing in science fiction cinema, as evidenced in the *RoboCop* remake (J. Padilha, 2014) where Lewis is played by a man, or in the prequels to *Planet of the Apes* (*Rise of the Planet of the Apes*, R. Wyatt, 2011 and *Dawn of the Planet of the Apes*, M. Reeves, 2014) where women play minor characters who never appear onscreen without their male companions. Unlike such TV series as *Battlestar Galactica* or *Terminator: the Sarah Connor Chronicles*, science fiction films continue to see mankind as male, seeking to define not what it means to be human but what it means to be a man. Female supporting characters are thus included not so much for what they have to say about *women* (in our postfeminist world, women are no longer the issue), but for what they have to say about *men*, providing a locus of difference from which hegemonic masculinity can be remodeled and validated. Furthermore, the inclusion of women tends to erase male violence and domination, as well as the persistence of unequal gender relations, as if Hollywood was unable to imagine a future with a different gender order.

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NOTES

1. In the wake of Yvonne Tasker's *Spectacular Bodies: Gender, Genre, and the Action Cinema* (1993), most books on women in science fiction and more generally the action adventure genre focus on 'tough women' and include case studies of Ripley and/or Connor: see for instance Sherrie Inness, *Tough Girls: Women Warriors and Wonder Women in Popular Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), Silke Andris and Ursula Frederick, *Women Willing to Fight: the Fighting Woman in Film* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007), Robin Ann Reid, *Women in Science Fiction and Fantasy* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2009). Furthermore, Ximena Gallardo has devoted a whole book to Ellen Ripley (*Alien Woman: the Making of Lt. Ripley*, New York: Continuum, 2004).

2. To my knowledge, only one article surveys the history and evolution of women's roles in science fiction film: Dean Conrad, "Femmes Futures: one hundred years of female representation in sf cinema", *Science Fiction Film and Television* 4:1 (Spring 2011): 79-99.

3. Again, whereas her analysis of female heroes is centered on only three films, including *Terminator 2*, Cornea never really emphasizes that female heroes are the exception, not the norm.

4. The Terminator thus outshines Sarah both as a warrior and a parent. For more on the Terminator's parenting skills, see Susan Jeffords. *Hard Bodies: Masculinity in the Reagan Era*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press (1994): 157-164.

5. For more on the negative stereotyping of feminists in the mass media, see Susan J. Douglas. *Where the Girls Are: Growing up Female with the Mass Media*. London: Penguin, 1995.

6. See Marianne Kac-Vergne, "The Limits of Hypermasculinity: Intimacy in American Science Fiction Films of the 1980s", in David Roche and Isabelle Schmitt-Pitiot (eds), *Intimacy in Cinema*, Jefferson: McFarland, 2014, 119-132.

ABSTRACTS

The present article examines the role and space given to women in contemporary science fiction films since the 1980s. While the character of Ripley in the *Alien* franchise has been widely quoted and analyzed, I wish to argue that Ripley is an exception obscuring the general sidelining of women in a genre concerned first and foremost with masculine concerns. The emergence of women as active sidekicks in the 1980s (in *RoboCop* or *Universal Soldier*) led to the fleeting rise of action heroines in the 1990s (e.g. *Terminator 2* and *Ghosts of Mars*), but the turn to postfeminism has contributed to the marginalization of women's issues and roles in the films of the last decades. So why include women at all? This paper contends that the female characters literally play a *supporting* role vis-à-vis the male hero, defining and confirming the acceptable bounds of masculinity.

Cet article s'intéresse aux personnages féminins dans les films de science-fiction contemporains des années 1980 à nos jours. Bien que le personnage de Ripley dans la série des *Alien* soit toujours donné en exemple, ce personnage central d'héroïne combattante est à mon sens l'arbre qui cache la forêt de films de science-fiction où les femmes sont très largement marginalisées. En effet, malgré l'émergence d'acolytes féminins dans les années 1980 (dans *RoboCop* ou *Universal Soldier* par exemple) et l'apparition de femmes d'action dans les années 1990 (comme dans *Terminator 2* ou *Ghosts of Mars*), le tournant post-féministe dans la culture populaire américaine a largement contribué à renforcer la marginalisation des questions et rôles féminins dans les deux dernières

décennies. L'inclusion de personnages féminins secondaires doit ainsi être examinée en relation avec la position centrale du héros masculin : de fait, ces personnages servent en premier lieu à définir et à conforter sa masculinité.

INDEX

Mots-clés: femmes, féminisme, post-féminisme, science-fiction, cinéma
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AUTHOR

MARIANNE KAC-VERGNE

Maître de conférences
Université de Picardie Jules Verne
mariannekac@yahoo.fr